

A certain Wilhelm Johann Carl Eduard Stieber

Almost certainly many of you will wonder: who was he? Yet in Italy we should be grateful to him since the result of his actions, although not aimed at that purpose, has greatly contributed to the achievement of national unity. If after the third war of independence (1866) we managed to obtain from Austria the cession of the Veneto, given the heavy defeats of Lissa and Custoza, and the subsequent possibility of conquering Rome (1870) without the French intervening in defence of the Pope, well all this was possible also thanks to the work of this man. But let's see how.

Berlin 1848 and its surroundings. The revolutionary storm that has upset the political balance of half of Europe has just subsided, and the reaction of the government of Frederick William IV, initially inclined to grant a series of liberal reforms, is not long in coming. In the austere courtrooms of Prussia, subversives begin to parade who, captured by the police, must now account for their actions.

In the trials that are held, among the numerous lawyers of the defence teams, a young lawyer rises to notoriety, distinguished, very competent, who with skilful and effective harangues counters the accusations charged against his clients, does not let himself be intimidated by the judges and strangely obtains unthinkable acquittals or mild sentences. Revolutionary circles often resort to his services, not least because his rates are moderately fair and he sometimes accepts the defence of less well-off defendants with free legal aid. His clients grew in number, but he was not a benefactor enlightened by new political ideas.

Taking advantage of the information gleaned confidentially from his clients, he transmits, in defiance of ethics, valuable information to the Prussian secret police who, in this way, manage to reconstruct the organizational charts of the revolutionary associations and to adjust accordingly. When the information is not exhaustive and requires additional investigations, he does not hesitate to go to the revolutionary organizations sheltered abroad and from those countries he sends precise and detailed reports. Among the personalities of the time who ended up under his lens there was also a certain Karl Marx.

His name is Wilhelm Stieber, born in Saxony, the son of a Protestant pastor and an English noblewoman. In the family they would have liked him a future as a minister of religion but Wilhelm is not cut out for that life. After some disagreements with his father, he went to live in Berlin where he graduated in law. To support himself in his studies, he began to collaborate with the police as an informant and that would be the springboard that would allow him to become the most skilled espionage expert of his time and the founder of the Gheimfeldpolizei, the military intelligence service of Bismarck's new Germany, with flattering results.

In the environment of the rigid Prussian police it is not easy to live, there are hierarchies to be respected and there is little room for personal initiatives. A skilled man like Stieber then easily draws envy and jealousy on himself, especially when his investigations end up sticking his nose into sectors that see him as smoke and mirrors.

It is not long before and, after yet another disagreement with his superiors, he resigns from the police. We find him in Russia where, accompanied by a solid reputation as an organizer, he offers his services to the Tsar who is busy defeating various revolutionary organizations that are undermining his power. In a few years of activity Stieber reorganized the bureaucratic tsarist police and since the revolutionary leaders were well camouflaged waiting for more favorable events, he created the premises for the formation of a very secret organization, the notorious OCHRANA, which aimed to fight the

enemies of the state with methods that included arbitrary arrests, torture, kidnappings and, when appropriate, the physical elimination of opponents.

When Stieber was introduced to Bismarck in 1863, he was already a high-level information agent. He had contacts with the major leaders of international espionage and, according to the chronicles, he even sent the services of the Papal States news relating to a possible attack on Pope Pius IX. His ability is now necessary in anticipation of a war against Austria, already planned with an alliance with Italy.

And the man gave the best of himself by personally taking on the espionage organization in the Habsburg lands where, disguised as a street vendor, it seems he traded religious statuettes and pornographic images to the Austrian troops. Between sacred and profane, he wandered far and wide in the territories where the armed clash was expected to take place, noting every detail useful for military purposes. He also created a group of agents recruited on the spot and managed to bring back to the Chief of Staff Von Moltke a considerable amount of valuable information. The Austro-Hungarian services, on the other hand, did not develop any information activities. General Benedek, commander of the Habsburg troops, relied on chance and suffered a crushing defeat in the battle of Sadowa.

After the war against Austria there was not much time to rest, the further war program this time was directed against France with the aim of securing the regions of Alsace and Lorraine to the new Germany. Stieber set up a formidable organization made up of over 10,000 agents (some even speak of forty thousand) who, disguised as tourists, fishermen, peddlers, etc., took note of everything, from fortifications to bridges, from railway timetables to the supply of horses, the possibilities of finding fodder, the preparation of wagons and the centralization of food. The state of practicability of the minor roads was not neglected either, and investigations were also carried out on the armament, training and morale of the French troops. The activity deployed had never had equal in Europe and for the armies of Napoleon III it was an unpleasant surprise.

When the German troops moved to the attack, they showed that they knew how to move on French soil as if they were at home, and at Sedan they led a textbook victorious battle. Stieber's information activity did not develop only before the conflict, it is said that during the clashes, which broke out in different areas of France, some ambulance wagons of phantom humanitarian associations appeared in the rear of the fight to take care of the wounded. It was later discovered, with much delay, that these ambulances collected only the French military and were hidden interrogation centers. In the French press of the time one could read sarcastic phrases such as this: "the Germans when they come to occupy a farm already know how many eggs they can seize daily". After the French surrender, Stieber hired about a hundred railway workers from Alsace-Lorraine, German sympathizers, who in the event of a resumption of fighting would have had to sabotage the entire railway system.

But the resumption of fighting was delayed for over forty years. When the threatening wind of the Great War returned to blow over that tormented region, the diabolical spy and his voluminous work were only a distant memory.

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